



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Puppy Body Handling Exercises

Goal Behavior

The puppy calmly accepts being placed into various positions and readily allows manipulation of its body parts. The puppy is relaxed while being handled, examined and groomed. The puppy raiser, and ultimately any caregiver, such as a veterinarian, should be able to handle the puppy anywhere on its body with a minimum of restraint.

Training Session Objectives

Each puppy will progress at a different rate depending on its temperament. The goal of each puppy handling session is to have the puppy calm and relaxed while being handled and to end on a positive note.

Video reference:

- Puppy Body Handling Exercises Part 1: youtu.be/0Yno3DOhZRM
- Puppy Body Handling Exercises Part 2: youtu.be/X_qrpu_eUrA

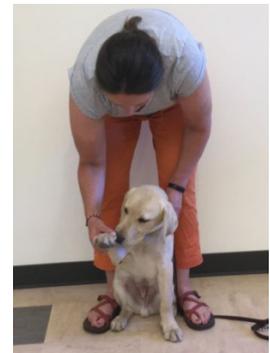
Prerequisites

Raisers can start these exercises as soon as the puppy comes home. The puppy should be exercised and relieved and preferably in a sleepy mood when first introducing these exercises. Puppies should know how to accept food rewards from the hand; puppies will have experienced food-taking in the kennel but may still need help finding and taking kibbles from the hand.

Session Set Up

Introductory puppy handling sessions should be done at home in a quiet area. Be sure that the puppy has good footing and that the surface is not slippery. A blanket placed on the floor may be necessary. A table, crate or chair close by, to keep the food stash on, is helpful. (Food should not be kept on the person while doing these exercises until the puppy has learned to ignore the bait bag. Until the puppy learns to only take food offered from the hand, he may help himself to the food pouch or “mug” the raiser for food in the pocket.) Having a crate in the immediate vicinity is good preparation in case the puppy needs a break from handling (see “Resistant and Mouthy Puppies” below.)

When the puppy is small, handlers should sit or kneel on the floor to do these exercises. As the puppy grows, standing over the puppy while it is in a sit position is appropriate. Junior raisers should have parental guidance; some puppies will take advantage of a child being on the floor with them and will become too playful and/or resist the child’s attempts at handling. In many cases junior raisers will have more success if they stand up while handling the puppy. A low footstool or low chair for the child to sit on while handling may be a good compromise. Should the raiser find it difficult to be on the floor with the puppy, they should consult with their leader.



STEPS

Handling Tips

The handler should be calm, relaxed and low key while handling the puppy. Verbal praise should be spoken in a low, soothing tone to prevent the puppy from becoming excited. For this reason, the marker “Nice!” is not used during puppy handling. The puppy should be rewarded with kibble to form a positive association with the handling exercises but this is not an operant exercise where the pup is marked for offering a behavior. Petting should be done with firm, slow strokes with open hands. Quick rubbing, tickling and patting will excite the puppy while stroking in long, slow movements will keep it calm.

The Calming Sit

- The handler should sit on the floor (or stand, see above) with the puppy in front, facing away from the raiser.
- The puppy should be placed in the standing position facing away from the handler. It is helpful if when sitting, the handler’s legs are spread in a “V” pattern to create a visual barrier for the pup. If standing, the puppy should be placed between the handler’s feet. The puppy should be as close to the handler’s body as possible so that the puppy can’t back away from the handler.
- One hand should hold the puppy’s collar while the handler’s other hand is placed behind the puppy on the upper part of its thighs. The puppy’s legs should be gently folded underneath it, placing it into a sit position.



- The handler’s thumb or a couple of fingers should be hooked through the puppy’s collar and the hand placed under the pup’s jaw cradling the head. As the puppy moves its head around, the hand under the jaw keeps a light hold and follows the puppy’s head movements while not allowing the pup to lower its head to mouth at the hands. As the pup matures, cradling the head will no longer be necessary.
- Alternately, one hand may be placed in the shoulder area, with the thumb through the collar, while the other hand cradles the puppy’s head (picture, right).
- The handler should softly and calmly praise the puppy. A long drawn out “Gooooood” is an appropriate way to let the puppy know that it is doing the right thing.
- As the pup is sitting, the handler may reach for a kibble and place it right at the puppy’s muzzle. Bringing the food right to the pup’s nose helps keep it from reaching out to the food.
- The puppy should be kept in position for just a few moments at first before being allowed to change position. Gentle pressure, slow stroking and calm



- food delivery will encourage the pup to hold still.
- As the handler ends the exercise, the release cue of “OK” may be given as the pup is allowed or induced to get up.

Initial Handling

As the puppy settles and calms, the handler may begin to handle and manipulate its various body parts. The handler should frequently return to the slow, calm stroking to keep the puppy relaxed. Frequent food rewards for relaxed, accepting behavior will make this a positive experience for the puppy.

- With one hand still supporting the puppy’s head (thumb or fingers hooked through the collar) the handler should lift the pup’s ears in turn and gently place a finger inside the ear canal.
- The puppy’s head may be gently repositioned and its eyes checked.
- A finger should be placed inside the puppy’s mouth and its gums massaged. With the mouth closed, the pup’s lips should be raised on each side and the teeth and gums inspected.
- With one hand supporting the puppy’s head, the handler should run the other hand over the puppy’s shoulder blade and down its foreleg in a very slow, deliberate movement. Keeping the hands flat and calm will help keep the puppy relaxed.
- The pup should have its feet picked up and its toes and nails examined.
- Both sides of the puppy should be handled equally.

Resistant and Mouthy Puppies

No matter how calmly and positively a puppy is handled, there may be times when the puppy becomes mouthy. This is normal puppy behavior that puppies practice on littermates and may try on humans. Some puppies are inherently more challenging than others. It is essential that stronger-tempered puppies accept handling early in their raising to avoid practicing unacceptable behaviors. Puppies who learn to avoid control by mouthing and flailing will become even more problematic as they mature, leading to possible career change. Puppies that learn to avoid control may even be challenging to place as pets once career changed. For this reason it is important that raisers experiencing ongoing mouthiness in their puppies seek the advice of their Leader/CFR promptly. Early intervention, and appropriate training and management techniques, will prevent the development of serious behavioral issues.

- More resistant puppies, those that try to avoid control of the head, may be easier to manage if one hand is placed on the chest area, with the thumb through the collar, and the other hand focuses on cradling the head.
- The more food rewards the puppy receives for good behavior, the more likely it is to accept handling without being resistant and mouthy. For this reason, keeping a high rate of reinforcement (lots of rewards in quick succession for good behavior, essentially preventing bad behavior) is the best way to prevent mouthiness.
- Some puppies are more resistant to handling at certain times of day or when mentally tired or when over-stimulated. Avoiding puppy handling exercises at these times is good practice – it sets up the puppy for success. As the puppy becomes more accustomed to being handled, it can be required to accept handling no matter what mood it is in.
- More active puppies, or puppies with junior handlers, may benefit from two handlers working together on these exercises initially: one person to hold and physically manipulate the puppy while the other person keeps the puppy engaged with food rewards.
- Assertive puppies may benefit from being handled in a Gentle Leader. Often just wearing the Gentle Leader will calm the puppy down. Mouthy puppies are easier to control when wearing a Gentle Leader. If the resistant puppy is not accustomed to wearing a GL, puppy handling exercises should be delayed until the pup is accepting of the GL.
- Puppies that are determined to mouth and/or growl, despite all efforts at positive handling, should be collar corrected and spoken to in gruff tone. If the puppy keeps up the “bratty” behavior, it should be matter-of-factly put in a crate and isolated for at least ten minutes. Puppies crave social interaction and for some, negative interaction is more rewarding than no interaction at all. Quickly but unemotionally isolating the puppy gives a strong message.
- When handling recommences, the handler should ask for just a few seconds of acceptance of handling before quickly rewarding the puppy so that positive progress can be resumed.
- Should the puppy resist handling often or not respond to the above techniques, the raiser should consult with their leader before continuing puppy handling exercises.

The Layover

The layover can be introduced as soon as the puppy is comfortable with the procedures above. For some puppies this may take a week of handling in several sessions per day. Other puppies, of a calmer temperament, may be ready for the layover almost immediately.

- The puppy is placed in the “calming sit” position in front of the handler, facing outwards.
- The handler places the right hand, fingers pointing down, on the puppy’s right shoulder. The thumb should be hooked through the pup’s collar.



- The left hand is passed underneath and behind the puppy’s left foreleg to gently but firmly grasp the right elbow. (Care must be taken to hold high on the pup’s leg to have more control.)



- The puppy should be gently and slowly rolled onto its right side by the handler moving the right leg out from underneath the puppy while using the right hand to support it into position.



- Once the pup is on its side the right hand should be moved to lie on top of the puppy’s neck/shoulder, still with a hold on the collar.
- The handler should continue to hold the leg at the elbow position until the puppy settles. Holding the elbow this way prevents the puppy from getting his leg underneath him, which would give him leverage to get up.
- If the puppy does manage to stand up, it should be placed back into a sit and the layover completed again in a calm manner.
- As the puppy lies on its right side, legs pointing away from the handler, it may be necessary for the handler to keep a hand in the collar to maintain control and keep the puppy lying down. Should the puppy struggle, it should be quietly restrained in position.

- Once the puppy is settled and accepting the new position, the handler should praise in a soft, low tone. A long drawn out “Gooooood” tells the puppy to keep doing what it is doing and a reward is likely. The kibble reward should be placed right at the pup’s muzzle for easy access without tempting the pup to move.



- For puppies that initially dislike this exercise and struggle, it is good training practice to reward the puppy for just a few seconds of calmness by letting it up the instant the handler feels it relax. A struggling puppy should not be released as this
- teaches the puppy that resisting handling works.
- Raisers should practice having the puppy lie on both sides. The instructions will need to be reversed to have the pup lie on its left side.
- Some puppies may need to be held in position, and rewarded for not struggling, for several sessions before moving on to the next step. More compliant puppies will move through the steps more easily and may relax into the layover sufficiently that handling can start almost immediately.

Handling on the Layover

- Once the puppy is relaxed and no longer struggling when laid over, the handler can use the hand that previously held the pup’s elbow to stroke the puppy in long, slow motions along the length of its body.
- The legs, feet and tail may be gently manipulated.
- The soothing stroking motion, with big hands, should be repeated between handling the body parts; this will help relax the puppy.



- Sessions may last just a few minutes initially, building up to five or ten minutes per session and eventually including brushing the puppy. Several short sessions per day are of great benefit with a young puppy. Even older puppies, preparing for recall, should be puppy handled a minimum of four times weekly.

Key Points

- If introduced at home in a relaxed way, puppy handling is usually well accepted by a puppy. The use of food rewards when the puppy is calm and compliant will help make this a positive experience for the puppy.
- When puppy handling is done at puppy meetings, the puppies should be allowed to get over the initial excitement of entering the room. They should be separated a good distance from each other to give them a chance to be successful. In the company of other puppies, handlers should expect less from the puppy as far as progress through the exercises and duration of the positions.
- Handlers should ask less of the puppy when handling in new situations and/or when a new handler takes the puppy. It is better training to ask less of the puppy and have it be successful, than to try to force the puppy to accept handling in a distracting situation.
- More challenging puppies will need to have the amount of time spent on calm and relaxed behavior built up slowly. To prevent frustration and set the puppy up for success, it may be necessary to ask for only a minimum amount of calm behavior before allowing them to be more active (playing some hand-tether games for example.)
- It is counter-productive to push an assertive puppy and then have to correct; better to proceed slowly and positively. If a correction is warranted, the handler should return to positive methods (food rewards for good behavior) as soon as possible.
- Tense puppies should have more stroking and massaging on the layover. Ideally the puppy should soften its muscles and have sleepy eyes when doing the layover. Introducing these exercises at the end of the day, or at naptime, is often an easy way to form a relaxed emotional response to puppy handling.



Puppy handling is one of the most beneficial exercises a puppy raiser can do. A dog that grows up comfortable and relaxed when having its body handled will make a wonderful companion for a person, who is visually impaired, will be a reliable family dog and will have low-stress veterinary visits. Puppy handling is the foundation on which raisers build a trusting relationship with a guide dog puppy. All the training that the puppy will go through before it becomes a guide starts with these simple, enjoyable exercises.